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ABSTRACT

The author focuses on the relevance of two assumptions (that change is a process, not an event; and that change is made by individuals first and then by institutions) for research and evaluation concerning P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Research findings and evaluation efforts are seen to be the basis for change in several areas: (1) attitudes on the part of school personnel and society; (2) organizational change to ensure proper delivery of services; and (3) training and retraining administrative and teaching personnel to implement the mandate. Problems with various educational research methodologies are considered, and the need to formulate proper research questions is stressed. (SBH)

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P.L. 94-142 and Interrelated Agendas: Research and Evaluation

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P.L. 94-142 and Interrelated Agendas:
Research and Evaluation

Stephen Toulmin (1972:vii-viii), in his book Human Understanding, suggests that people do not display their rationality "by ordering their beliefs in tidy formal structures, but by their preparedness to respond to novel situations with open minds—acknowledging the shortcomings of their former procedures and moving beyond them." The outcome of choices and decision-making processes are not dictated by logicality.

On what basis should changes be made in school systems that are trying to implement P.L. 94-142? In addition to the obvious impetus, the Law, needs assessments, surveys, etc., have presumably served a purpose in providing a data base for decisions about change. For example, what staff development gimmick should we try next? But these instruments often reflect a formalized means of producing something called perceived needs or opinions. I question how valuable these instruments are when reality-based issues reflect economic, moral and sociopolitical imperatives. S. Sarason and J. Doris (1978:17) maintain that "mainstreaming, in the near and distant past as well as today, is not an educational issue or problem. It is a reflection of the nature of and changes in the larger society, if

only because the definition of deviancy, atypicality, or handicapped arise out of societal norms."

I do feel that providing the least restrictive environment is an educational issue. If for no other reason, by law, it is an educational issue. But I agree with Sarason and Doris that changes in the larger society play an important part. Efforts on the part of individuals and groups outside of education, court decisions and legislation are responsible for bringing the issue into the educational arena.

In studying and interpreting institutional change, Gene Hall (1978:49) posits several key assumptions. The following two are especially relevant, I feel, in focusing on potential agendas for implementing P.L. 94-142:

> 1. *Change is a process, not an event.* The implementation of innovations is not accomplished by the occurrence of a single event; rather, from the faculty's point of view, change is a process that may cover as long as several years.
>
> 2. *Change is made by individuals first and then by institutions.* An institution cannot be described as having changed until the individuals within it have changed what they are doing in relation to the innovation. It is likely that key administrators will have to change first by openly supporting an innovation. Ultimately, however, the various individuals who are required to use the innovation will have to do so before it can be said that the institution as a whole has changed.

Internal aspects of organizational change are reflected in the above two key assumptions. External aspects of

organizational change are always present in the socio-cultural dynamics of the societal setting. These characterizations have implications for research and for evaluation concerning the implementation of P.L. 94-142.

Most research in education, as well as in most social science disciplines, has traditionally tried to emulate natural science methodology. Research data is presumed to be neutrally produced. Evaluation has been thought of as a separate activity. These are generalizations but they characterize the basic ideology permeating educational research and evaluation activity. I would like to suggest that this ideology does not serve those of us interested in research, evaluation and the practice of providing the least restrictive environment to handicapped individuals. The following remarks suggest that research and evaluation need not be separated and in fact would enhance our implementation efforts if they were inter-related.

Currently, handicapped children, however they may be categorized, are mandated by law to be placed in a least restrictive environment. This demands change in several areas: (1) attitudes on the part of school personnel and society; (2) organizational change to ensure proper delivery of services; and, (3) training and retraining

administrative and teaching personnel to implement the mandate.

These changes need to be based on research findings and evaluation efforts stemming from paradigms which respond to the nature of the enterprise. Namely, interpreting educational activity surrounding the implementation of P.L. 94-142 is a vastly different enterprise than studying natural science phenomena.

Traditional research and evaluation techniques have emphasized a value-free and neutral stance toward the subjects. The purpose of research is to build theory. An evaluator is someone who looks at a program objectively. But who cares about the obtuse language of the research findings and how many people read the evaluator's report? Sociocultural, moral and political imperatives of education contexts have been ignored. This reflects a positivist stance toward theory, data and the relationship between theory and practice. Theory developed out of this research paradigm has been far removed from concerns in the real world and consequently serves practitioners in very limited ways. The hope of being able to translate theory into useful information for practitioners is naive. The calculus underlying most of the research in education has little resemblance to the inner logic and situational logic of

human beings working together in organizations.

Traditionally, in education research there has been no distinction made between the nature of data in the physical sciences and the nature of data in the human sciences (See G. Cole, 1978). Such a view embraces a reductionist position which assumes that all statements in the human and natural sciences fall within a program of unitary explanation. In this conceptual framework the analysis of human activity in educational organizations presumes the same type of logical conditions and reduction to a factual domain as do the data in the natural sciences. The differences, according to this view, is one of degree, not of kind, between the natural and social sciences. Theory building in this conceptual scheme refers to building a theory within a deductive theoretical system holding certain propositions as axioms from which all other prepositions will be deduced by mathematical or formalized logical reasoning.

The research of non-moral phenomena (such as ball bearings rolling down inclined planes) involves a generically different project than the interpretation of sociocultural and political phenomena. The objective and predominantly empirical models (whether inductive or deductive logic is used) adhered to by many natural science researchers have severe limitations when applied in sociocultural and

political arenas. These remarks reflect the assumption that the traditional naturalistic models, which employ a predominantly empirical viewpoint mainly considering phenomenal and causal manifestations, fail to comprehend the process of individuals in their construction of sociocultural reality. This framework is profoundly inadequate to flush out problematics as well as potential alternative actions demanding a focus on on-going processes with individuals being a genuine concern.

Research based on a contextual interpretation of human beings as moral and political phenomena can show a shape of a given organization. Jürgen Habermas (1971:161) defines hermeneutic or contextual understanding as being "directed at a traditional context of meanings. It is distinguished from the monologic understanding of meaning required by theoretical propositions." Understanding in research does not involve analyzing the structure of a problem to the point of eliminating all contingency; rather it recognizes the importance of the aims and intentions of the researcher and the people research, and the context which gives rise to the possibility of research in the first place. This ultimately rests on the assumption that the "state" of social individuals is really a process of men and women, and their construction of sociocultural reality. Research needs to involve a co-understanding between researcher and researched which

relies on a type of dialectic and is part of an on-going evaluation process.

In asking questions, one assumes a predisposition toward, as well as presuppositions about, the phenomena in question. How a question is phrased, what the question is directed toward and the categorization of the answers into an existing matrix or theoretical framework all reveal, upon examination, an assumed ontological nature of sociocultural reality on the part of the questioner.

Researchers' questions need to promote an interpretation of world views, which stem from individuals (i.e., the researcher and the researched) interacting with each other. The world views of any given culture, or group of individuals, do not stand out in a static state ready to be observed, recorded and analyzed in terms of aggregates of objective knowledge.

In putting individuals (i.e., the researcher and individuals in the research population) at the center of the inquiry, new horizons can emerge in the description of the social group at large. This allows for the politics of situations to be examined. If researchers approach people in the research population with an understanding of the unique opportunity they have for ferreting out important sociocultural and political data, the results will provide a rich data base for making changes in existing approaches to problems in

the implementation of P.L. 94-142. Decisions which are made are, in part, at least, only as appropriate as the data collected. The collected data needs to reflect real worlds of administrators, teachers, students, and community members.

The self-actualization process for any individual and for groups of individuals at large can only come about with efforts directed at understanding the unique as well as the common among different problems in educational organizations. The designs of research problems need to take into consideration not only solutions to problems or answers to questions, but more importantly, what kinds of problems are we really facing and what types of questions should we be asking? Creating proper research questions is a challenge educators can no longer dismiss. If this can be done in concert with the individuals of organizations participating in research efforts, there may be the possibility for generic understanding to emerge from specific contextualized inquiry. A human science of organizations may then slowly emerge in a continually changing manner which is both recognized and systematically addressed. Research and evaluation of our efforts to implement P.L. 94-142 can provide the arena for an emerging integrated educational context. This is one way we can acknowledge the shortcomings of our former procedures and move beyond them. In our efforts to enhance education for exceptional students,

we ferret out problems which take on political and sociocultural dimensions. We can also provide opportunities for important questions to arise for educators in general.

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